

## Covid-19 & schooling for uncertainty

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# **BERA Bites 7** **Exploring the impact of Covid-19**

Pedagogy, curriculum & assessment

FEBRUARY 2021

## EDITORS

ELIZABETH EDWARDS

& JO GOODMAN

WITH ALISON FOX



## ABOUT BERA

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## ABOUT THE BERA BLOG

The BERA Blog was established to provide research-informed content on key educational issues in an accessible manner. Its aim is to produce and promote articles that attract policymakers, parents, teachers, educational leaders, members of school communities, politicians and anyone who is interested in education today. It also welcomes the submission of research-informed articles from across this community.

The blog is edited by a small team comprising academic representatives chosen by BERA's Academic Publications Committee and the BERA office. All content is approved for publication by one or more of this team. However, the views of the authors are their own, and the views expressed on the blog (and in this collection) are not the official views of BERA.

The Blog is currently curated by the editorial team of Gerry Czerniawski, Alison Fox and Rowena Passy.

See [bera.ac.uk/blog](http://bera.ac.uk/blog)

## ABOUT BERA BITES

The BERA Bites series presents selected articles from the BERA blog on key topics in education, presented in an easily printable and digestible format to serve as teaching and learning resources for students and professionals in education.

Each collection features an introduction by editors with expertise in the field, and each article includes questions for discussion, composed by the authors, prompting readers to further explore the ideas and arguments put forward in the original articles.

See [bera.ac.uk/bera-bites](http://bera.ac.uk/bera-bites)

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## CONTENTS

<b>EDITORIAL</b>	<b>4</b>
Elizabeth Edwards & Jo Goodman	
<b>THE FRAGILITIES IN THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM REVEALED BY COVID-19, &amp; HOW TO PUT THEM RIGHT</b>	<b>6</b>
Gemma Moss	
<b>RESEARCHING THE WORLD IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: THE ROLE OF BRICOLAGE</b>	<b>8</b>
Anna Robb	
<b>SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM &amp; PARTICIPATIVE LEARNING BEYOND BRICKS &amp; MORTAR</b>	<b>10</b>
Lydia Lymperis	
<b>VIRTUAL TEACHING FOR CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA: THE REALITIES &amp; DISTURBING ABSENCE OF RESEARCH</b>	<b>12</b>
Emma Derbyshire	
<b>RENEGOTIATING TEACHER IDENTITIES: REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT WELLBEING &amp; ONLINE LEARNING DURING COVID-19</b>	<b>14</b>
Phillip Poulton & Rachel Yoo	
<b>AGILITY, RETURN &amp; RECOVERY: OUR NEW COVID CONTEXT FOR SCHOOLING &amp; TEACHER EDUCATION?</b>	<b>16</b>
Warren Kidd	
<b>QUARANTINED AT HOME? CRAFT PRODUCTIVE LEARNINGSAPES &amp; WORKSPACES THROUGH THE USE OF RECORDED MUSIC</b>	<b>18</b>
Memory Malibha-Pinchbeck	
<b>THE INCREASING NEED TO EDUCATE CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS: AN OUTCOME OF LOCKDOWN MEASURES</b>	<b>20</b>
Carol Robinson	
<b>MAKING POST-GCSE DECISIONS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: THE NEED FOR ACTION</b>	<b>22</b>
Ruth Lupton, Stephanie Thomson, Lorna Unwin & Sanne Velthuis	
<b>COVID-19 &amp; SCHOOLING FOR UNCERTAINTY</b>	<b>24</b>
Rebecca Webb & Perpetua Kirby	
<b>CLOSING THE COVID-19 GAP: WHERE SHOULD INTERVENTIONS BEGIN?</b>	<b>26</b>
Tom Milson	
<b>POST COVID-19: A 'BRAVE NEW WORLD'?</b>	<b>28</b>
Victoria Carr	
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHORS</b>	<b>30</b>



COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

# Editorial



**ELIZABETH EDWARDS & JO GOODMAN**

NEWTOWNABBEY INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN SCHOOL  
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At the time of writing, it is only months since Wuhan was an unknown name, a 'furlough' was something taken by missionaries, and children engaging en masse in online learning was confined to science fiction stories. The coronavirus pandemic and its associated lockdowns upended our lives and presented challenges and consequences that were unimaginable in February 2020. As teachers, the announcement of national lockdowns and the sudden transition to online learning flung us in at the deep end with little idea of how, or whether, education would continue. In higher education, institutions have been tasked with digitally cultivating a sense of belonging and with delivering effective, 'value for money' learning and teaching both online and on socially distanced campuses.

As the impact of the global pandemic continues to unfold, for this issue of BERA Bites we selected the following blog posts as we felt they had offered us some valuable reflections regarding pedagogy, teacher identity, curriculum, assessment and wellbeing. While many reflections may be context-specific, they also have a broader applicability and raise further lines of inquiry for our own practice. The authors consider important issues with implications for education, but also how we can develop a collective vision for education beyond Covid-19.

Despite the challenges that have permeated our education sector, the pandemic gave us an unexpected chance to re-evaluate the make-up of our education system and what is truly important. In the first article in this collection **Gemma Moss** identifies some lessons we can learn, and

suggests ways in which we could seize this opportunity to address deeper flaws in the education sector.

How do we really know what has been going on? Is it possible to be objective when we are all experiencing a global crisis? **Anna Robb** addresses the challenges of researching education in a pandemic situation. Objectivity may have become a far-off dream while we all navigate our own daily challenges and positions. However, using a 'bricolage' method of circular reflexivity, she explains that we can still attain meaningful and reliable information and research.

The challenges posed by online teaching over the course of the lockdown may have seemed new to us (though they appear likely to be with us for some time to come). However, in her contribution, **Lydia Lympers** evaluates how they relate to pre-existing pedagogical challenges, and draws parallels with research carried out in rural Greece before the pandemic to consider how these can be, and have been, overcome.

**Emma Derbyshire** observes the difficulties that many children with dyslexia are experiencing with virtual teaching, and asks what we can do to make our online teaching more accessible and useful. Analysing the current danger of one-size-fits-all assumptions, she highlights the need for further thought and research into the ways in which our online pedagogy is – and is not – relevant or helpful for neurodiverse children.

**Phillip Poulton and Rachel Yoo** discuss the disintegration of much that we have taken for granted in our professional identities. Drawing on their own



experience, they share how they have encountered mutual, continual renegotiation of teacher and student identities as virtual learning progresses and develops, arguing that we need to be aware of the constant redefinition of our roles and duties if we are to continue to teach effectively in the current situation.

Similarly, **Warren Kidd** explores how teachers have found their identities developing and maturing as a result of their experiences during the crisis, drawing lessons from them and arriving at solutions to problems that can apply to us all as teachers.

Since the lockdown, students have been assigned more and more aspects of the teacher's traditional role. On their shoulders rests most if not all of the responsibility for managing their own motivation, focus, time management and mindset. The creation and maintenance of their own time and learning spaces have been left to them, despite their having little or no preparation or skills in this respect. **Memory Malibha-Pinchbeck** investigates how students have developed their use of recorded music to personalise their learning spaces and make their study time more efficient.

Lockdown has confined a significant number of children to situations in which they may find themselves vulnerable. **Carol Robinson** therefore challenges the current factual approach to human rights education and calls for a more context-relevant and empowering curriculum.

As we all know, GCSE exams can do much to determine a child's future. However, is it just the final grades that contribute to this? The time of preparing for GCSE or A-level exams is also a time for planning and investigating possible decisions for a student's life after those exams. In an article originally written before the recent 'cancellation' of these exams, **Ruth Lupton, Stephanie Thomson, Lorna Unwin and Sanne Velthuis** express their concerns about lockdown's impact on the whole assessment process.

**Rebecca Webb and Perpetua Kirby** consider how our current curricula assume societal and educational certainty – or rather, a lack of uncertainty. This pandemic, alongside other recent challenges such as climate change and recession, necessitates a more critical, creative and resilient education. The authors' inspirational vision is an education that enables children to respond to fresh challenges, develop solutions to unfamiliar problems and flourish within lived uncertainty. Does the current focus on technical and factual knowledge enable this?

There has been a great deal of discussion about the pandemic's impact on academic progress. **Tom Milson** argues that while this is important, we need to focus on

recovery from Covid-19's psychological and emotional impact if we truly want to help students develop in the pandemic's wake.

We start with Gemma Moss's plea for a reassessment of our education system, and end with **Victoria Carr's** impassioned argument for the same. By calling a halt to everything we once thought so important, this pandemic has presented us with an unparalleled opportunity to reflect on our own values, aspirations and purpose in life. Will we be happy simply to rebuild the old world, or will we take this chance to construct a transformed future?

It is evident that while everyone has been caught in the same storm over the last year, not everyone has been in the same boat. Across all stages of education, we must focus our attention on recovering from Covid-19 and employ strategies to ensure that we do not leave a generation of students behind. The reflections provided by the contributors to this BERA Bite encourage us to challenge inaccurate assumptions about how students learn best, to utilise reliable research, to reflect on our positionality and identity and to respond to the existing and emerging needs of all learners. While the pandemic has caused great disruption and uncertainty, we now have an exciting opportunity to rediscover and remake education. We are all encouraged to consider our own priorities for change so that collectively we can push for a more critical and creative education system and celebrate students' incredible resilience during this profound crisis.

#### ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The posts in this Bite have been chosen by Elizabeth Edwards and Jo Goodman, who were invited to edit the issue as master's students in education at the Open University. The issue was co-ordinated by Alison Fox as member of the BERA Blog's editorial team.

#### A NOTE FROM THE BERA BLOG EDITORS

While you read these blog posts, you might also think about your own contexts or research. Perhaps you would like to contribute a post to the BERA Blog, or perhaps when you are next at a conference or professional development event you might come across someone who you could encourage to write for us (see [bera.ac.uk/submission-policy](https://bera.ac.uk/submission-policy) for details on how to submit). Please consider interesting methodological aspects, issues and approaches that would be worth reporting more widely, as well as the content of studies. As the BERA Blog team and our colleagues develop these resources we welcome feedback that can help us improve their quality and accessibility.

# The fragilities in the English education system revealed by Covid-19, & how to put them right



**GEMMA MOSS**

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY CENTRE, UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

**Covid-19 has presented schools with a series of dilemmas since lockdown began, and continues to do so as schools seek to reopen to all their pupils.<sup>1</sup>**

There have been few reliable sources of advice for schools to turn to during the crisis. Government guidance has often appeared ill-informed and unhelpful, leaving schools to work out how to deal with the most pressing issues quickly and directly, using the resources they have to hand.

Our ESRC-funded research project<sup>2</sup> has been tracking what primary schools have been doing in response to Covid since the beginning of May 2020, using a combination of surveys, interview data and documentary collection. Public debate and government announcements have often been at odds with schools' experience on the ground (see Moss et al., 2020).

1 Original blog post, published 14 October 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-fragilities-in-the-english-education-system-revealed-by-covid-19-and-how-to-put-them-right>

2 This blog post discusses findings from the research project, 'A duty of care and a duty to teach: Educational priorities in response to the Covid-19 crisis'. Funder: UKRI/ESRC Rapid Response to Covid-19 Call, project no. ES/V00414X/1. Researchers: Principal investigator: Gemma Moss; co-investigators: Alice Bradbury, Sam Duncan, Sinead Harmey and Rachael Levy.

Key fragilities in the ways in which the English education system currently operates stem from over-centralisation, a lack of awareness of problems on the ground, and a preference for pressure-driven management linked to testing and inspection that ignores the material impacts of poverty on schools and communities.

Our analysis (ILC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) builds from our observation of how primary schools have balanced their duty of care for their pupils during the crisis with their duty to teach. This balancing act has been a particularly pressing concern for those schools working with our most disadvantaged communities, where the need to help families stay fed, and issues for pupils living in overcrowded conditions with no access to outside space to stay safe, have been particularly acute. (In the most affluent schools – that is, the quartile with the lowest take-up of free school meals – 46 per cent of teachers felt reassured that families had the necessary resources to support learning at home, but this proportion fell to only 6 per cent among teachers in the least affluent schools [Moss et al., 2020].)

The crucial role that primary schools play within their local communities, including through the support they offer for pupil health and welfare, is



underacknowledged both in our funding formulae for schools and in our testing and inspection regimes. Using high-stakes accountability and norm-referenced testing as the drivers of system repair risks seriously distorting schools' priorities at this critical time (ILC, 2020d).

**England's high-stakes accountability regime pressurises schools to focus their Covid recovery plans on teaching-to-the-test and over-targeted catch-up programmes, rather than urgently needed planning for a curriculum that can re-engage and reconnect children with learning more broadly.**

We know the pandemic has hit our poorest communities hardest. However, in the context of a high-stakes accountability regime of the kind in operation in England, speculative calculations of the long-term impacts of the Covid pandemic on system performance can create huge pressures on schools to focus their recovery plans on quickly meeting test targets. This may prove counterproductive, pushing schools into teaching to the test and over-targeting catch-up programmes at the precise moment at which they need to be planning for a curriculum that can re-engage and reconnect children with learning more broadly (ILC, 2020b).

Our systematic review of the literatures on learning loss and learning disruption concluded that the latter literature is more useful (Harmey & Moss, 2020) – not least in terms of the emphasis it places on recovery and resilience, rather than on speculative calculations that may exaggerate losses through the very methods they deploy. The literature on learning disruption recognises that recovery from a crisis takes time, including time for research, and that local knowledge, attuned to the many different ways in which the crisis will have impacted 'here', provides the best starting point.

From our research, we conclude there are three broad lessons for the English system to learn.

1. We need stronger connections across the education system that can engage all stakeholders in deliberation over how things run.

2. Funding to schools working with our most deprived communities needs to be more generous with respect to meeting children's basic needs, including food, mental health and welfare.
3. A punitive high-stakes accountability system creates instabilities in the system that we cannot afford.

The pandemic has highlighted deeper flaws in our system that need to be addressed. Government plans for recovery must change, or they will do more harm than good.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In your experience of education during the Covid-19 crisis, what have been the main pressure points: for communities, for pupils, for staff and for schools in your area?
2. What are the merits of taking a slow rather than a fast road to recovery?
3. If we are to remake education after the pandemic, what is your priority for change?





COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

# Researching the world in uncertain times

The role of bricolage



**ANNA ROBB**  
UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE

*'Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable.'*

Dewey, 1929, p. 41

The world that Dewey evokes in this quote has never seemed more real.<sup>1</sup> We find ourselves living amid a global crisis outside our control. From a research perspective it is a world rich with the possibilities of new knowledge. The impact of this crisis on schools,

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 10 June 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/researching-the-world-in-uncertain-times-the-role-of-bricolage>

teachers, pupils and families needs to be recorded and explored in order to learn from it. What is the best way to explore these experiences that keeps everyone – the researcher and the researched – as safe as possible in the current climate?

The first issue to consider is the researcher and their personal response to the crisis. In the current situation we are not detached from the experience, we are living it too. It is therefore impossible to be objective while undertaking research. The researcher also has an ethical responsibility to safeguard their own, as well as their participants', physical and psychological wellbeing (BERA, 2018, p. 35).



The second issue concerns research participants. It makes sense to start gathering data now, with people responding in real time as opposed to gathering selected memories a month or two later (Rubin, 2012). However, what is said and done during a crisis may be different from what might be following a period of calm reflection. Someone who consents to take part may feel differently a year from now. The issue of ongoing consent (BERA, 2018) is therefore relevant, ensuring that communication between participant and researcher is such that both parties can respond to the circumstances around them as they evolve.

**What is said and done during a crisis may be different following a period of calm reflection. Someone who consents to take part may feel differently a year from now.**

When conducting qualitative research the researcher aims for neutrality rather than objectivity. To do this, reflexive tools are employed (Berger, 2015; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006). In an uncertain world it is perhaps time to embrace the methodological approach of 'bricolage' (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). A key feature of bricolage is the flexibility to respond to the research context over time. The researcher embraces multiple methodological and theoretical lenses, allowing for breadth and depth to emerge in the analysis. The approach is cyclical, using a process called 'feedback looping' and an anchor known as a 'point of entry text' (POET), which stimulates the initial inquiry and is revisited throughout the process in order to determine new lines of inquiry (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Ongoing reflexion, stimulated by the POET, aims to be critical and transformative (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). The researcher acknowledges the ongoing subjectivity that is present and acts accordingly in relation to the research and the participants.

**Bricolage provides a mechanism to acknowledge and respond to the interdependent relationship between researcher, participant and the environmental context of the research.**

Bricolage provides a mechanism with which to acknowledge and respond to the interdependent relationship between researcher, participant and the environmental context of the research. Ethical reflexivity (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006) is therefore integral to this approach. Bricolage also provides structure in which this can occur on an ongoing basis from the initiation of the project, through implementation, to analysis and dissemination. This in turn provides mechanisms to ensure that ongoing consent between researcher and participant is maintained throughout. Bricolage is therefore an approach worthy of further attention and consideration by researchers wishing to explore and respond to the current situation we all find ourselves in.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When planning and implementing a research design on a topic that also affects the researcher, what issues do they need to consider and reflect on?
2. Identify a suitable POET for exploring the impact of the pandemic on schools, pupils and teachers. Reflect on the reasoning behind your selection.
3. What are the possible barriers to implementing bricolage as a methodological approach?





COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

# Social constructivism & participative learning beyond bricks & mortar

triloks / iStock



**LYDIA LYMPERIS**  
NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

As the world grapples with the short-to-longer-term imperative to identify distance- and remote-learning alternatives to previously face-to-face instruction, I am struck that some of the key themes that have emerged from my ongoing doctoral research in rural communities in Greece might also be relevant to responding to the growing Covid-19 crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Governments around the world are making substantial efforts to get students supplied with technology, and there seems to be an in-built assumption that as long as access to appropriate technology is ensured, and some technical instructions are disseminated, teachers will be automatically equipped to support students' needs digitally. Similarly, it is assumed that students will automatically move into that receptive mode which leads to high levels of engagement.

These are well-intentioned efforts, of course, but I worry that the outcome will be disappointing. I argue that we need to outflank the kind of thinking that leads us to believe that online learning affords no scope for pedagogical creativity, and that efficient delivery of online content alone equates to educational progress. Online pedagogies do not require resort to

such outdated models. Yet, whether due to a lack of appropriate teacher support or a lack of student/parent buy-in for novel learning modalities, these types of didactic approaches may be what most students will receive during school closures (Winthrop, 2020). I would like to highlight the following important online learning design principles from my ongoing investigation with learners aged between eight and 12, which draw on social constructivist theories and are anchored in extant empirical research and global practice.

**We need to outflank the kind of thinking that leads us to believe that online learning affords no scope for pedagogical creativity... There is a risk that didactic approaches may be what most students will receive during school closures.**

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 27 May 2020:  
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/social-constructivism-and-participative-learning-beyond-bricks-and-mortar>

## TECH-MEDIATED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CAN HELP ADDRESS STUDENTS' AFFECTIVE NEEDS

Social distancing may take an emotional toll on students who are missing out on daily interactions with their peer groups. While measures are being taken by education planners to address the social dimensions of the pandemic and its potential impact on the emotional wellbeing of students (for example, through the provision of professional psychological support; see Chang & Yano, 2020), it is crucial that an e-pedagogy is adopted that enables naturalistic peer interactions of the kind that students are accustomed to. To be sure, these types of interactions are harder to replicate over screens, but synchronous contact sessions that employ open-ended tasks with more than one right answer, designed to draw on the cognitive strengths and efforts of each student in a collaborative group, lend themselves well to the purpose. Tasks could simply be joint writing projects, investigations with multiple entry points for learning, or working to solve problems with realistic and meaningful contexts. Compared to individualistic instructional strategies, co-operative learning not only offers a degree of much-needed flexibility during a time of global crisis, but is also evidenced to have a bigger positive impact on student achievement, pointing to the powerful role of peers in the learning process (Hattie, 2012). Importantly, it can be enacted in low-tech remote learning conditions by making use of the virtual break-out group functionality of free teleconference software or, depending upon the available telephone service, by means of offline mobile-based group calling.

## TIMES OF INCREASED UNCERTAINTY REQUIRE A PEDAGOGY THAT NURTURES EPIPHANIES

In Brazil, grassroots initiatives supported by the Paulo Freire Institute have led to the creation of a model of online education that uses scientific documentaries offered in accessible language in its effort to generate public debates, among people in the favelas and other communities, on the socioeconomic change currently taking place in the country (L. Dowbor, personal communication, May 20, 2020; Paulo Freire Institute, 2018). In a similar vein, *National Geographic* is providing free access to daily live broadcasts of their Explorer Classroom model, connecting educators, caregivers and young people with scientists, researchers, educators and storytellers across all seven continents in order to bring exploration to life. Whether such approaches are understood as falling under the remit of problem-based learning or enquiry-based learning, they all serve as crucial reminders that these novel educational environments that are being set up around the world must not be merely repositories of content; instead, they should equip students with the necessary skills to make sense of what is going on around them as

much as inside them. Often this will be achieved by enabling them to experience the excitement of formulating big questions, and subsequently embarking on a pursuit for knowledge that is not necessarily bound by predetermined (or, for that matter, common) learning outcomes, yet embracing a heuristic process that teaches them how to 'learn, unlearn and relearn' (Toffler, 1970, p. 414).

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What role do teacher attributes such as openness to experience and experimentation, curiosity, inquisitiveness and creativity play in students' deeper engagement with the subject matter?
2. Robinson (2017) argues that teaching for creativity involves asking open-ended questions to which there may be multiple solutions; working in groups on collaborative projects, using imagination to explore possibilities; and making connections between different ways of seeing. What might be some of the pedagogical challenges to, and opportunities for, recreating these opportunities in an online learning environment?
3. What are some of the skills that students need for successful participation in technology-mediated collaborative learning?



COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

# Virtual teaching for children with dyslexia

The realities & disturbing absence of research

@markusspiske / Unsplash



**EMMA DERBYSHIRE**  
HEADTEACHER

I am writing this post from both a parental and scientific perspective.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, from a parental stance, Covid-19 has undoubtedly driven us into situations that could never have been pre-empted. As any parent who has a dyslexic child will have discovered, even in a typical school-based teaching environment the concept of neurodiversity is still relatively new and finding its way into the classroom (BDA, 2020; Armstrong, 2012).

Now, parents have been lurching into teaching at home, and with this has come the rise of 'virtual teaching'.

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 26 Jun 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/virtual-teaching-for-children-with-dyslexia-the-realities-and-disturbing-absence-of-research>

Educators are doing their very best to maintain engagement with their pupils by using available virtual technologies. However, given the fast pace of change, have we considered the efficacy of such methods for children with special educational needs (SEN) such as dyslexia? The answer, by and large, is no, not yet.

Dyslexia affects an estimated 5-to-10 per cent of the population globally (Knight, 2018), so it is important to have a broad understanding of what it is and how it affects students. The British Dyslexia Association has adopted the Rose (2009) definition of dyslexia (these tend to be variable), which defines dyslexia as:

*'a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points...'*

Rose, 2009

Dyslexia is typically underdiagnosed in school children, and recent research has referred to these 'the lost children' (Barbiero, 2019).

As a scientist, when home-schooling my daughter I observed that virtual calls and the content shared through these tended to be:

- difficult to see/read
- used mixed fonts
- asked questions with little thinking time
- were of a prompt pace
- relied heavily on short-term working memory (dyslexics tend to score lower than peers on memory working tasks) (Gray et al., 2019)
- tended not to repeat information.

When these were delivered I began to see my daughter's confidence and self-esteem being eroded, and her anxiety returning. So, she began to disengage.

**'Virtual teaching' is presently being delivered to children with dyslexia/SENs without any underpinning science or research.**

This led me to search the 'evidence-base' behind virtual teaching for children with SEN, including dyslexia, and I found that it was largely absent. There is some evidence available in relation to the customisation of websites for those with dyslexia to improve their usability (Kous & Polančič, 2019). Recommended adjustments include modifications to font size, font type, reducing the amount of information on screen, using more graphic elements and modifying contrast between the background and text. I also liaised with various related organisations, and this observation was further confirmed: 'virtual teaching' is presently being delivered to children with dyslexia/SENs without any underpinning science or research.

A further survey of 2,600 teachers from England and Wales mainly related dyslexia to behavioural descriptions (79.5 per cent), followed by cognitive (39.3 per cent) and biological descriptors (9 per cent), with 71.8 per cent mentioning that dyslexia was not adequately covered in initial teacher training courses (Knight, 2018). So clearly there is an ongoing need to raise dyslexia awareness per se, with this becoming even more relevant given that modes of teaching delivery are rapidly evolving.

It is hoped that this blog has been both thought provoking and insightful. Thank you for reading.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it ethical to deliver teaching to dyslexic/SEN children in this 'virtual' way? Are we yet again boxing all children together when other approaches may be more appropriate?
2. Why has no research into this issue been undertaken, given that we have shifted through the 'technological' era? What research would help to develop this important field?
3. How can we better prepare for the future and move things forward from here?



# Renegotiating teacher identities

Reflections on student wellbeing & online learning during Covid-19

@carsonarias / Unsplash



**PHILLIP POULTON & RACHEL YOO**  
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

In response to the current Covid-19 outbreak, universities across Australia, and across the world, quickly moved to restructure the delivery of courses that customarily took place on campus (Burns, Dagnall, & Holt, 2020).<sup>1</sup> We are both first year tutors in undergraduate courses and, like many, we began the academic year face-to-face with students. However, such face-to-face interactions were not to last. Swift changes reorganising our classes to full-time online modes resulted in the rapid learning of new technologies and the formation of new professional identities. The formation of these new identities involves ongoing renegotiations of the roles of both teacher and learner, prompting further consideration of how knowledge continues to be constructed through synchronous and asynchronous online interaction (Comas-Quinn, 2011). Furthermore, practices associated with our former teacher identities have been shrouded in vulnerability, as we expose the comfortableness of our former academic presence traditionally established through face-to-face teaching (McNaughton & Billot, 2016).

In attempting to make sense of this renegotiation of our teacher identities, we engaged in ongoing dialogue with our students through informal conversations after online tutorials. Our students' comments presented a wide variety of responses, both positive and negative, on their new identities as full-time online learners and our new roles as online teachers. We drew on these informal conversations, with 15 of our students, as part of our own ongoing professional conversations. We noted that when first faced with the prospect of moving

to online learning, our students appeared to experience the following.

- Initial feelings of scepticism and doubt, together with perceptions that online learning was ineffective.
- Sadness, frustration, anger and indifference at the lack of routine and human interaction such rapid changes produced.
- Disruptions to existing social networks, including lost opportunities to interact with peers and teachers on a regular basis.

As the semester progressed, our conversations with these students shifted, and started to reveal emerging features of their new online learner identities. Students appeared to be developing:

- a heightened appreciation for online learning, and the emerging and creative opportunities to build social relations online
- improved self-regulation and commitment to the overall learning process
- a growing awareness of the benefits of self-assessment in monitoring levels of engagement and motivation in learning and assessment.

As our students appeared to become more independent online learners, we started to reflect on what role we were playing in supporting this transition. While we remained as facilitators of learning, we realised that as educators we required:

- greater flexibility in assuming roles of 'nurturers and carers' rather than 'deliverers' of content

<sup>1</sup> This is an amended version of the blog post originally published on 1 July 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/renegotiating-teacher-identities-reflections-on-student-wellbeing-and-online-learning-during-covid-19>

- increased attention and care in becoming more streamlined and effective communicators
- greater awareness of the ‘individual’ student and their needs, particularly their access to technology and support networks
- ongoing commitment to creating engaging content through new forms of technology.

When brought together, our reflections highlight the need for educators to re-envision ‘care’ in the context of online education, where Covid-19 has impacted, and continues to impact, students’ wellbeing and sense of security. In particular, the impact of isolation due to the limited accessibility of crucial social support networks for many students needs to be carefully considered (Burns, Dagnall, & Holt, 2020). It is critical that wellness, in these times, is not assumed to be ‘common sense’ (Thompson & Porto, 2014). Strategies to support student wellbeing (see for example Crawford, 2020) may range from acknowledging students’ individual circumstances and extending opportunities for them to engage in conversation with their peers, to being attentive to the logistical issues associated with technology access and use. It is important that considerations are made in the design of our online lessons, with tasks communicated in a clear manner and related to authentic contexts to support students’ engagement (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guardia, & Koole, 2020). By offering students targeted and consistent support in their online learning, educators and teachers alike can become ‘anchors’, providing students much-needed stability amid rapid change and relieving their anxiety, thereby ensuring that they remain actively engaged in learning (Bao, 2020). Importantly, Rapanta et al. (2020) encourage us as educators to reflect on our teacher ‘presence’ during these complex times. To support students’ wellbeing, we must consider their preparedness to participate effectively in online learning, maintain and enhance our communication channels so that spontaneous student–student or student–teacher interactions are supported, and be prepared to take a more facilitating approach to our instruction (Rapanta et al., 2020).

As we finish our first semester here in Australia, there remain uncertainties regarding the return to face-to-face teaching. However, we are both adamant that this is something we need to learn from and apply moving forward. We have learned that our students require teachers that are flexible, streamlined communicators that advocate for student wellbeing first and foremost. We have become more aware of how, during these complex times, challenges to student wellbeing must be addressed promptly so that our practices are adapted and transformed in ways that best support students’ new identities as online

learners. Accordingly, our teacher identities need to be continually renegotiated as we explicitly acknowledge the value and importance of our role in supporting ‘the whole student’ (Crawford & Johns, 2018). While these qualities aren’t revolutionary discoveries, their value and importance – whether in front of a computer screen or in a lecture room – is back in the spotlight.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How might you collect feedback from students about their wellbeing?
2. How could this feedback be used to transform your practices in a way that best support students’ identities as online learners?
3. What does it mean to support the ‘whole’ student in the online learning space? What does this mean for our identities as online educators?
4. What are some potential challenges that educators may face when attempting to support students’ wellbeing online?





COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

# Agility, return & recovery

Our new Covid context for schooling & teacher education?

@john\_cameron / Unsplash



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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES, UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

Previously on the BERA blog (Kidd, 2020a) I have drawn attention to the work of Glade Primary School, an east London school in the borough of Redbridge, England, and their ‘agile’ adoption of video conferencing (VC) technology during the Covid pandemic (see Kidd, 2020b).<sup>1</sup> My ongoing ethnography with the school suggests a ‘pedagogic agility’ – the flexible and in-time adoption of new technology practices in a meaningful yet pragmatic way. I frame this as a matter of the ethics around ‘craft practice’ (Sennett, 2008): an issue of community building as well as the learning and teaching of the curriculum.

However, in light of the recent National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) report by Lucas, Nelson and Sims (2020), the story of Glade Primary seems perhaps more unusual than usual: these authors present a widening gap across school provision and responsiveness as the Covid-19 crisis continues. Green (2020) echoes similar warnings, noting the potential ‘generational threat’ of school closure. Alongside this, the seeming decrease in Teach First numbers (as reported by Whittaker, 2020) also shows that while schools are facing troubling times, teacher education might not be far behind. In the case of Glade Primary, and other schools adopting similar

remote models, VC teaching is not simply a case of supporting the curriculum but it is also a means of future-proofing, in an agile way, craft practices in the light of the continuation of the Covid context. As one teacher notes, ‘we are having to cope with the unintended... but are better teachers for it’; ‘I am the same me now I am online, but I feel even closer to my children and their families than ever before’.

In this apparently widening gap between schools maintaining community and those unable to do so, we become conscious of the need for leadership around how to work within the spaces created by this gap. In exploring the slow (maybe phased) return to schooling in September 2020 we must recognise the massive logistical challenges ahead for schools and school communities. On top of this return, we also have what the Scottish government’s recent report (2020) refers to as the ‘recovery phase’ – a hybrid approach to the places and spaces of learning and teaching that involves a commitment to a blended model of home-online-school learning for an extended yet interim period. For Carpenter and Carpenter (2020), a ‘recovery curriculum’ warns against the removal of regular daily routines, which leads to isolation or atomisation and has potentially serious consequences for pupils’ wellbeing. The ‘recovery curriculum’, then, is about recovering interaction and the emotional and psychological benefits it brings. Although, in its usage by the Scottish

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 25 Jun 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/agility-return-and-recovery-our-new-covid-context-for-schooling-and-teacher-education>

government's education recovery group (2020), we can see how the notion of 'recovery' can also be applied not only to routines and relationships but to a catch-up curriculum itself – an attempt to make up for lost time.

In Glade Primary School we see a school committed to wellbeing and community as key drivers for the adoption of their VC practices. This agility around community brings, to teachers, '...a sense of happiness that I can see the children. I never signed up for this, but I am glad it is still working for us'.

**Although they are now conducted in a new space, relationships are only possible due to the old spatiality: the 'new space' is dependent upon the relational qualities of the old.**

For the teachers at Glade, the use of technology as a solution to the loss of community is a change to, but not a replacement of (or a challenge to), the modernity of the traditional classroom. Although they are now conducted in a new space, relationships are only possible due to the old spatiality: the 'new space' is dependent upon the relational qualities of the old; new, agile possibilities exist due to the craft practices from the previous, traditional classroom. Despite the continuation of the Glade community, there is still the recognition of the need for 'recovery': 'we will need to work hard next year; make sure everyone is welcomed back and feels safe'; 'we need to make-up for lost-time'. Despite the agility, recovery is foremost in the school community's mind, as it will be in all school communities.

These three aspects – **(phased) return, recovery and agility** – will play out in complex ways in schools come the new academic year. The pressures of Covid-19 will be felt in various contexts – not just the pressure on schools and schooling, nor solely on learners, families and their wellbeing, but also on the practices and processes of teacher education, supporting novice entrants into this new, changed profession. We all need to be agile educators, exploring how best to 'recover', while using the hybrid spaces and tools we have in the meantime, along the way.

#### ENDNOTE

\*Please note the school is identified by name here with the permission of the headteacher.

#### FURTHER READING

For an exploration of the initial impact of Covid-19 on the agility of university-based teacher education, rather than schools, see Warren's work on the moving of the practicum online:

Kidd, W. & Murray, J. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on teacher education in England: How teacher educators moved practicum learning online. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 542–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1820480>

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#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How has the Covid-19 crisis enabled schools to develop more agile practices as a matter of necessity?
2. What has the continuation of Covid-secure measures meant for 'recovery' in schools (that is, recovery of lost curriculum, of lost pupil social relationships and of lost pupil wellbeing)?
3. How might Covid practices and online/at-a-distance learning have brought families and schools into closer working relationships?



# Quarantined at home? Craft productive learningscapes & workspaces through the use of recorded music

@drew\_beamer / Unsplash



**MEMORY MALIBHA-PINCHBECK**  
OPEN UNIVERSITY

The Covid-19 pandemic means that countless students and education staff are expected to continue their work from home.<sup>1</sup> The worldwide quarantine has been a game-changer, blurring the boundaries between the personal space of home and the institutional workplace. This is proving to be a difficult adaptation for some students and staff (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). To get around some of these unexpected work and study conditions, creative strategies can be used to transform unproductive home spaces into effective learningscapes and workspaces.

During my doctoral research I investigated why and how students undertaking GCSE and A-level (or equivalent) courses used recorded music (from various genres) while studying. I discovered that students used their recordings as tools to promote self-management. This type of listening practice is different from when listening to music for enjoyment, to learn the lyrics of a song or to memorise the music. In fact, students who regularly used recordings when studying used a bank of

tried and tested materials in the form of saved playlists or favourites. This familiarity with songs prevented students from deep listening, and highlights the fact that recordings were utilised rather than listened to. Students who used their recordings also differed from those who stated that they randomly selected recordings for generic background noise.

Students in my study used recordings to manage varied conditions such as learning or studying in classrooms they disliked, difficult classmates, isolating spaces, spaces that were deemed too quiet, overcrowded home environments and noisy study spaces. Participants came from two educational institutions in London: a further education college and a religious fee-paying academy.

Data from the study indicated that recordings were used to: alter mindsets; focus; work for longer; manage emotional and psychological wellbeing; and manage (or avoid) interactions with others. Similar findings have also been arrived at by psychologists (Azizinezhad, Hashemi, & Darvishi, 2013; Krueger, 2013), ethnomusicologists, educational and media researchers (Bull, 2008; Viladot et al., 2018).

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 1 May 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/quarantined-at-home-craft-productive-learningscapes-and-workspaces-through-the-use-of-recorded-music>

The study's findings also highlighted the fact that not all people could successfully use recordings while studying (and working). Students that did not listen to recordings while studying reported finding sound or lyrics irritating and distracting. Some felt overwhelmed at multi-tasking; some sang or danced to music; others stated that recordings hindered their cognitive abilities.

**Students used recordings to manage varied conditions such as learning or studying in classrooms they disliked, difficult classmates, isolating spaces, spaces that were 'too quiet', overcrowded home environments and noisy study spaces.**

In summary, some of my research findings indicate that recordings can be beneficial while studying (or working), by providing the following affordances.

- **Inspirational narratives** for those feeling overwhelmed, panicked, apathetic or demotivated towards their educational obligations.
- **Emotional management**, managing sadness or frustration by using uplifting recordings to change mood or cathartically vent negative emotions; also, to reduce stress and anxiety by using familiar or calming recordings.
- **Enhance cognitive abilities:** increase the ability to memorise, be creative and problem-solve.
- **Temporarily compartmentalise personal problems** by using recordings to distract or separate one's self from issues out of one's control.
- **Personalise the soundscape**, blocking the sound of others (TV, children playing, loud conversations) to make it suitable to work in.
- **Take ownership of a space:** use recordings to push others out of the workroom/space, if possible.
- **Quicken the completion of general tasks** by stopping procrastination through social media, gaming, shopping, unnecessary conversations and much more.
- **Pace the user** by matching the seriousness, tempo and length of recordings to the duration and importance of tasks to avoid boredom and tiredness, and to stay focused until the task is completed.

This list of benefits varies from person to person based on the needs and context of each user. So, rather than take the benefits and drawbacks of recordings as prescriptive, this blog points out that recordings can be employed to help some students and homeworkers adapt to some of the difficult working conditions they find themselves in. For more information on the benefits of recordings see also: for cognitive efficacy, Nutley, Darki and Klingberg (2013); for emotional wellbeing, McFerran and Saarikallio (2014); and for space and media, Bull (2008).

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss when and how the skill of self-management can be developed by educators for students.
2. Assess the significance of having control over one's learning conditions and to what extent this can be achieved.
3. What creative strategies can you think of, or do you already utilise, that can help students engage with their learning?





COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

# The increasing need to educate children about their rights

An outcome of lockdown measures

fizkes / iStock



**CAROL ROBINSON**  
EDGE HILL UNIVERSITY

Many children in the UK, and elsewhere in the world, have been away from their regular school and early year settings, spending lengthy periods of time at home since the introduction of lockdown measures due to Covid-19.<sup>1</sup> While this has been a positive experience for some children, others will have experienced negative and traumatic situations.

In a report published by the children's commissioner for England (Clarke, Chowdry, & Gilhooly, 2019) it is estimated that 2.3 million children in England are living with risk because of a vulnerable family background. This group includes children in the care system, children known to have experienced personal harm and those living in families where there is a high likelihood of harm. Of these children, a formal programme of support is in place for an estimated 669,000 and a further estimated

761,000 are known to social services, but there is a lack of clarity about their level of support or whether they are receiving any help at all. However, an estimated 829,000 children living with risk are 'invisible', meaning that they are not known to the support services and thus are not receiving any formal programme of support.

Furthermore, a recent briefing by the children's commissioner for England (2020) reported that there is evidence to suggest there has been an increase in the number of domestic abuse cases in England since the Covid-19 outbreak. The risk of children witnessing, or being, victims of domestic abuse has, therefore, been heightened. For children who fall within this vulnerable category, knowledge of their rights and confidence in their ability to access support in cases of rights violations is paramount.

Currently, human rights education is taught in schools as part of relationships education for primary-age pupils and in relationships and sex education for

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 2 September 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-increasing-need-to-educate-children-about-their-rights-an-outcome-of-lockdown-measures>.

secondary-age pupils. Both primary and secondary pupils also learn about human rights in health education (DfE, 2019), citizenship education (DfE, 2013) and personal, social, health and economic education. While these subjects include some important, albeit limited, teaching about human rights, the focus is on the transmission of factual information about human rights and sources of support available in cases of rights violations. However, for children's rights education to be meaningful, children need to understand how rights apply to their own context and to be empowered to confidently voice concerns when their rights have not been respected or when they feel unsafe and at risk.

**An estimated 829,000 children living with risk are 'invisible', meaning that they are not known to the support services and, thus, are not receiving any formal programme of support.**

Unicef's Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA)<sup>2</sup> goes some way towards doing this. It aims to support schools to embed children's human rights into the school ethos and to teach children about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as well as help children understand how the rights enshrined by the convention apply to their own lives. Research into the impact of the Unicef RRSA shows that where schools teach children about the convention, it helps them to develop the confidence to report instances where their rights have been disrespected (Sebba & Robinson, 2010, p. 20). However, not all children attend schools that have achieved or are working towards RRSA, and even for those who do, a greater emphasis could be placed on ensuring children are equipped with the skills and confidence to seek help when they have encountered situations in which they feel vulnerable.

Many children are now returning to school after an extended period of time at home. During their time at home they would have had limited opportunities to articulate concerns about their wellbeing and safety. The need for children's rights education at all levels of education, including for children in early years settings is therefore paramount if children are to be equipped with the skills and confidence to voice concerns about instances in which they have felt at risk or unsafe, and in which their rights have not been respected.

2 <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/about-the-rrsa/>

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What policy, cultural and strategic changes would be needed to ensure all practitioners, teachers and other professionals working with children have knowledge and understanding of articles within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the its underlying principles underlying these?
2. What action can be taken to embed children's human rights into the ethos of early years and school settings?
3. Even where children and young people are aware of their rights, they may not know how, or have the confidence, to uphold their rights. How can early years and school settings support children and young people to voice concerns and take action?



# Making post-GCSE decisions during the Covid-19 crisis

The need for action



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**In the public debate about the impacts of the Covid-19 lockdown on education, much attention has understandably been given to concerns about disadvantaged children falling behind at school, and to the potential impact of the estimation of examination grades on young people's post-school prospects.<sup>1</sup>**

Much less has been heard about disruption to the practical processes that would normally be getting underway now as 16-year-olds decide their post-GCSE future. So it was good to hear David Johnston MP at the House of Commons' education committee's session with Gavin Williamson (parliamentlive.tv, 2020; starts 10.09am) urging the secretary of state to monitor destinations data as a measure of the Department for Education's success in mitigating the impacts of the crisis. Responding, Williamson expressed concern that young people who are out of school or college this spring and summer may not be urged to take up the opportunities available to them.

Our ongoing research for the Nuffield Foundation<sup>2</sup> focuses on the post-school transitions of young people who do not achieve the benchmark grade 4+ in English and maths. This group is more likely than their higher-attaining peers to be disadvantaged and/or to have special educational needs. In 2019, 23 per cent of those without grade 4 in English and maths were eligible for free school meals compared to 9 per cent of those who did achieve grade 4 in both subjects (DfE, 2020).

1 Original blog post, published 14 May 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/making-post-gcse-decisions-during-the-covid-19-crisis-the-need-for-action>

2 <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/students-who-do-not-achieve-a-grade-c-or-above-in-english-and-maths>

Some of these young people are just as likely as higher-attainers to be purposeful about their future pathways (Swift & Fisher, 2012). Our research suggests, however, that for many the GCSE year in particular is associated with anxiety and a sense of failure. Although faced, theoretically, with a broad array of opportunities in the form of courses and apprenticeships, some will reach the end of year 11 with no firm plan about what to do next. Careers guidance and opportunities for work experience will have been very variable (Houghton, Armstrong, & Okeke, 2020; Moote & Archer, 2018). Motivation and confidence to investigate, select and apply for post-GCSE opportunities may understandably be low.

**In the current situation, the post-GCSE plans of all young people – particularly those labelled 'low attainers' – are at greater risk and potentially more constrained. Government needs to act now to ensure that young people receive proactive support, information and guidance.**

In interviews we conducted with young people, we heard numerous accounts of how critical the spring and summer of year 11 can be in helping them make their post-GCSE transition. Other studies have pointed to the importance of young people's families and social

networks in the making of post-16 ‘choices’ (Mangan, Adnett, & Davies, 2001; Heath, Fuller, & Johnston, 2010; Snee & Devine, 2014) and to the role of advisors and learning providers (Beck, 2015). Our research showed how, during this critical period in year 11, some young people were steered, pushed or dragged into post-16 opportunities by teachers, staff of colleges or independent training providers, as well as parents and older siblings. For example, one young man said that he

*‘wasn’t even gonna go to college, I was just going to chill out at home... so my high school teacher she came to my house and said come on, you’re going to college.’*

Another said their ‘choice’ of a course at an adult education centre was made when a member of staff

*‘rang me, cos I came here before. So she rang us back saying do you want to come to this one? So I thought I might as well.’*

College open days and visits to schools by colleges and training providers were also particularly important for some young people because they gave concrete opportunities to which they could respond rather than having to do a lot of investigative work and decision-making themselves. One of our interviewees said,

*‘I came here [college] one day, and then they just started, they said, do you want to apply for here, sort of thing. And she was just going on about cabin crew. And I was like okay, that’s fine.’*

Another, who by contrast had a clear career aspiration, had been paralysed by anxiety over GCSE exams from making any applications. An adviser from a local college visited his school and convinced him to come to an open day, which led to a suitable course. Getting an apprenticeship also appeared to be conditional on ‘who you know’, given that these were small in number and relatively poorly advertised.

Our research indicates that Gavin Williamson is right to be concerned. At the current time, even young people who are confident of GCSE success may be at some risk of being diverted from their plans if their estimated grades fall below their expectations. Good quality apprenticeships will certainly be harder to find. For those labelled ‘low attainers’ the risks are even greater. Government needs to act now to ensure that schools, further education and training providers and local authorities have the capacity to be proactive in contacting young people to offer support, information and guidance. Without such timely action, there is a real risk that many young people will fail to make a successful transition, and will join the group that go ‘missing’ from the destination statistics every September.

## AUTHORS’ NOTE

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What should the government do now to help young people whose transitions have been interrupted by Covid-19?
2. Should we be more concerned that schooling leaves many young people with a sense of failure? If so, what should be done?
3. Why do the young people who need to make key occupational decisions at age 15/16 feel underserved by careers advice? How would you change the system to make it work better?



# Covid-19 & schooling for uncertainty

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Covid-19 reveals an urgent need to focus on an area of worldwide educational significance: the importance for schools of engaging with uncertainty as a key facet of education.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, a technical education model emphasising certainty has largely superseded progressive education, raising challenges for how to embrace diversity and enhance children's capacity to navigate uncertainty. The pandemic is the most recent global societal challenge (alongside climate change and recession, for example) to demand creative, critical and resilient civil societies. Unesco (2016), the OECD (2018) and the European Union (2015) call for education (in its broadest sense) to respond to challenges where solutions are as yet unknown or require constant rethinking.

Without abandoning a knowledge-based curriculum rooted in epistemological certainty, in a historical moment of heightened flux *and* inequality it has never been more vital to reinvigorate what is meant by transformative education in ways that acknowledge and attend to the diversity of uncertainties experienced by children. Adults (teachers, parents, scientists, politicians) do not know answers in advance, or where things might lead, given changing pandemic (and post-pandemic) contexts. Giving children opportunities to make sense of Covid-19 in their lives addresses World Health Organisation (2020) education and behaviour priorities: to promote engagement with 'public health measures' and 'ethics', and 'address drivers of fear, anxieties, rumours, stigma' (p. 9).

Children living with everyday precarity and vulnerabilities due to social and economic inequalities are the worst affected by the pandemic: failing to engage with lived uncertainties means stopping short of addressing educational inequalities. Systemic and structural inequalities also shape families' ability to scaffold children's engagement with Covid-19 queries and feelings with regard to, for example, issues such as time-poverty, heightened economic insecurities and access to home-schooling computer technology. Focusing on attainment and socialisation can be productive in terms of social mobility, but meritocracy disguises deep-rooted divisions (Markovits, 2019). Covid-19 signals the imperative for supporting the expression of vulnerabilities and uncertainties within state-funded education, so that children have the capabilities to live with, act on and hope through them (while not distracting from 'certain' technical approaches), and participate in creating more just and equitable worlds.

**Children living with everyday precarity and vulnerabilities due to social and economic inequalities are worst affected by the pandemic. To fail to engage with lived uncertainties is to stop short of addressing educational inequalities.**

1 Original blog post, published 29 June 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/covid-19-and-schooling-for-uncertainty>

Where ‘knowing’ is understood as ‘the transformation of disturbed and unsettled situations into those more controlled and more significant’ (Dewey, 1929), embracing complexity and uncertainty becomes a way of ‘not-knowing’ too quickly or narrowly when deciding how to respond responsibly. The challenge is to engage children with uncertainty: those for whom it is not a choice but a feature of unequal life-chances, and who have unequal access to the ‘competitive advantages’ of embracing not-knowing (D’Souza & Renner, 2014, p. 156) (as recognised by business, for example – see Belsky, 2011).

Such engagement requires naming (not erasing) intersecting Covid-19, structural and everyday lived (ontological) uncertainties, and asking probing questions. It means opening up the possibilities to engage in diverse pedagogies – inquiry, creativity and deliberation – that are themselves uncertain (pedagogical uncertainty), in which not-knowing is valued for requiring ongoing thinking and imagination (epistemological uncertainty).

The current emphasis in schools on children’s conformity through attainment and socialisation is important, but technical knowledge alone is insufficient for children from diverse backgrounds to make meaning of uncertainties with no clear solutions in interconnected but unequal global lives. Having additional opportunities to ‘not-know’ becomes a mode of being open, attentive and prepared to respond, and offers possibilities for children to shift into ‘being’ participants rather than simply recipients of adult-generated knowledge.

Teachers need encouragement to experiment with how to support children’s engagement with the lived uncertainties of Covid-19 and other issues. This includes using diverse pedagogies to support different ‘registers’ of not-knowing.

- **Knowledge:** going beyond the assumed certainty of scientific fact/technocratic solutions to engage multiple knowledges, including modelling, interdisciplinarity and local knowledge. Children need to puzzle-over information, ask ‘Why this knowledge, not that?’, and consider its relevance to their current and future lives.
- **Affect and embodiment:** the world is felt, imagined and thought about through sensory engagement and movement; attention to feeling can identify children’s concerns and desires, including the worlds they would like to help create together.
- **Spirituality and ethics:** the spiritual is integral to schooling and embedded in many children’s backgrounds. Some may have access to spiritual

guidance on ‘accepting uncertainty’, but all children require opportunities to attend to difficult questions that are inherently uncertain.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can teachers be enabled to make space for ‘not knowing’ in their classrooms? (Given that teachers are themselves schooled in, and held to account for, their own subject knowledge.)
2. What types of activities offer opportunities for pedagogical uncertainty across different phases of education and subject disciplines?
3. What inclusive school policies and practices might best support pupils to shift between conforming and uncertain pedagogies? (Given that pupils are so well attuned to producing ‘right answers’.)





COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

# Closing the Covid-19 gap

Where should interventions begin?

francescoch / iStock



**TOM MILSON**

EAGLE HOUSE SCHOOL, BRAMLEY

**This year coronavirus has put unprecedented pressure on our schools.<sup>1</sup> It has been inspiring, as we continued to support our young people through the global pandemic, to see so many creative approaches to teaching and learning, such as those offered by the Oak National Academy,<sup>2</sup> who delivered over 20 million lessons online.**

As our pupils begin to return to school, teachers are now faced with the challenge of maintaining educational standards while supporting the process of psychological recovery. The Department for Education (2020a) has dedicated over £1 billion of additional funding to support this process, with a

small, £8 million portion of it specifically dedicated to psychosocial recovery (DfE, 2020b). It is now up to school leaders to determine where they focus recovery spending in a time of great uncertainty.

The executive chairman of the Education Policy Institute (EPI), David Laws, has noted that the disadvantage gap has almost certainly widened following the outbreak of Covid-19 (Lough, 2020). Given indications that this gap was already beginning to widen before the pandemic (Hutchinson, Reader, & Akhal, 2020), it is natural that academic catch-up will be the focus for many school leaders as we return to school.

Indeed, targeted support measures recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) include one-to-one or small group tuition, structured intervention programmes (such as reading) and

1 Original blog post, published 2 October 2020:  
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/closing-the-covid-19-gap-where-should-interventions-begin>

2 <https://www.thenational.academy>

even extended school days (EEF, 2020). Further recommendations from the EEF include supporting ‘great teaching’, assessment and feedback, and support with transitioning to a new school.

Managing my own school at above 50 per cent capacity throughout the crisis, such educational strategies have been secondary to supporting the mental health of my pupils. I foresee the start of this academic year being no different.

Research has shown that isolation and medical quarantine has a profound traumatising effect on young people and their families (Sprang & Silman, 2013), with negative psychological effects including confusion, anger and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Brooks et al., 2020). With this in mind, it is unsurprising that over 80 per cent of young people have reported that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health (Young Minds, 2020)

With reported deaths now in excess of 41,000 and unpredictable local lockdowns (BBC News, 2020), we are entering a period in which pastoral care and support is fundamental to taking our pupils through this time of uncertainty. There is now a pressing need to focus on the ongoing psychological impact of the pandemic, which continues to impact on our pupils.

**There is now a pressing need to focus on the ongoing psychological impact of the pandemic, which continues to impact our pupils.**

During one online seminar I attended during this period (Freeman, 2020) a reflection was shared which stood out for me: this has not been a continuing period of study at home; our students have been trying to learn in the midst of a global crisis.

During April this year, Professor Barry Carpenter described how we must provide children with ‘the space to be, to rediscover self, and to find their voice on learning in this issue’ (Carpenter, 2020). I believe this should continue to be our primary focus as we begin our new academic year.

As vital as it is to employ strategies to enable our students to close the attainment gap, we should begin by focusing our attention on the provision of support for psychological recovery. We must recognise and celebrate the incredible resilience of our students through the most profound crisis of a generation.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you feel teachers and school leaders should prioritise intervention planning after the pandemic?
2. How can we support pupils with a space to rediscover self, while also ensuring that the attainment gap doesn’t widen?
3. What changes do you think schools should make to better support pupil mental wellbeing within the continuing impact of the pandemic and partial school closures? What changes should school leaders implement to support staff?



# Post Covid-19

A 'brave new world'?



**VICTORIA CARR**  
HEADTEACHER

Globally, the impact of Covid-19 has been truly unprecedented and unforeseen.<sup>1</sup> In all sectors of society, in all nations, the almost immediate, total suspension of everything we know has left many people bewildered, confused, financially unstable and afraid – the ramifications of which may be felt for a generation. For those in the neoliberal educational hamster-wheel of ever-increasing accountability and performativity measures (Ball, 2003), combined with high-stakes testing, diminishing school budgets, rising mental health issues in children (alongside reductions in the provision and remit of support services such as school nurses, social care, educational psychology, and special educational needs), it has given us an opportunity, suggested previously (Coe, 2013), to critically reflect.

But how many of us are doing so?

The international suspension of life as we knew it has afforded us all the prospect of rethinking what we value in, and about, our education system (Benn & Downes, 2016), to evaluate how it is configured, and decide what we take forward into the new world, post Covid-19. We have the potential to reverse the increase of disillusioned teachers finding alternative employment; 'burnt-out' school leaders leaving the profession (ASL, 2016); children suffering a plethora of mental health

issues; and millions of pounds being wasted annually on inspections and test creation, security, delivery, marking and league table production.

Funding for schools could be reworked to support invaluable coaching for staff, as well as training and development; to address imbalances in infrastructure and digital poverty (Holmes & Burgess, 2020), alongside knowledge and understanding of the world for pupils. School curricula could be trauma informed, personalised and creative, focused not on the regurgitation of facts but on assimilating information and engendering a love for learning and collaboration. Innovation, inspiration, age-appropriate character education, equality and social conscience could be embedded (DfE, 2017).

I am not suggesting that children live in a world where their needs and abilities are not assessed by professionals in mathematics and English, merely that it is not for the benefit of the child to perform costly, high-stakes tests for the purpose of creating a competitive league table that inevitably places some schools at an immediate disadvantage (Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, 2008). Equally, I am not suggesting that schools operate in an unregulated way. Headteachers, and by extension teachers, need to be given support and trusted to run schools. Ofsted could be given a different remit, far less intrusive, and based on the context of the school

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 10 September 2020:  
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/post-covid-19-a-brave-new-world>

and what staff and the community are doing to try to mitigate or build upon that context to ensure the best possible outcomes for the children they serve.

Accountability could be about how the money per child is being spent and how much support the families and children are given, rather than only on pupil outcomes. Inspection outcomes could be bespoke and celebratory, and grades removed from creating league tables as this current system contains inherent consequences: potential breakdown of the local community as parents strive for children to go to a 'better' school away from their friends and home; unhealthy competitiveness between colleagues; and an unfair skewing of the funds and standards in groups of local schools.

**We have the potential to reverse the increase of disillusioned teachers finding alternative employment; 'burnt-out' school leaders leaving the profession; children suffering a plethora of mental health issues; and millions of pounds being wasted annually on inspections and test creation, security, delivery, marking and league table production.**

Should we, as a nation, be questioning our politicians and thinking more effectively about provision for the vulnerable? The Pupil Premium funding has simply not worked as intended (Viner, 2018). Schools receiving a few hundred pounds for the children of families in financial hardship has not had the desired impact, because the reality is that children go home and spend evenings, weekends and holidays with their families. They spend a maximum of 1,330 hours in schools a year; the influence a school can have is limited in isolation, because the other 7,430 hours are beyond the reach and influence of a school. But situated within a range of other services that have been eradicated, such as children's centres and youth clubs, collaboratively we could provide year-round opportunities to broaden horizons and keep children safe and fed, while engaging them in culturally rich experiences.

If education was apolitical (Dutat, 2017), organised by a thinktank of education, business and industry leaders – not to sway voters – we would have the authentic

ability, as teachers and professionals, to become the architects of the future of our vocation and to take from this situation something positively transformational for all who work within our field, and by extension the lives that we influence.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Are the current accountability/performativity measures and league tables fit for purpose and future proof in our educational landscape?
2. To what extent can school staff have an impact on rising mental health issues in children and what are the tools they would need in order to try?
3. To what extent is professional coaching invaluable for staff in schools and what are its major benefits?



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Victoria Carr** is a primary school headteacher in the north west of England, a post she has held for seven years. She is a mum, of two teenagers. In her spare time she is a British Army reservist and also lectures on MA programmes in educational leadership (previously at Chester University and currently at Liverpool Hope). In addition, she has completed two MAs (in equality and diversity, and educational leadership) and a doctorate, and is currently working on a third MA in military history at Buckinghamshire New University. She loves sport, baking and the outdoors. She recently presented a TEDx talk at Chester University on the power of language and how we can all be everyday heroes, and has done several podcasts for a range of platforms on the topic of educational leadership.

**Emma Derbyshire**, PhD, PGCHE, RPHNutr is a scientific health writer and former academic who taught and supervised nutrition and biomedical science students. She is the founder of Nutritional Insight, a scientific writing consultancy, and has published over 150 peer-reviewed papers, including articles related to nutrition and neurodiversity.

Finally and most importantly she is a dyslexia advocate, passionate about driving awareness and change in current education systems. @emmadyslexiaunlocked, which she founded on Instagram, shares experiences and home practices from lockdown and beyond. Contact her at [drderbyshire@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:drderbyshire@yahoo.co.uk) or +44 (0)7584 375246.

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- computer-supported collaborative learning
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**Memory Malibha-Pinchbeck** is an early-career researcher and has recently completed her interdisciplinary PhD in sociology, education and ethnomusicology at the Open University. Prior to her doctoral research she taught English studies and study skills at a further education college, independent schools and academies. Memory has also taught undergraduate seminars at universities, and has collaborated in some research projects in the education and healthcare fields. Her research interests include sociology of education, culture and identity, policy and ethnomusicology.

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